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ABSTRACT

The Wheeling Housing Authority in Wheeling, West Virginia, conducted two residential programs to help women living in public housing develop economic self-sufficiency. The Learning Independence from Employment (LIFE) program was an intensive 3-week program designed to accomplish the following objectives: improve participants' communication skills and attitudes; teach participants to set and accomplish goals; motivate participants and encourage them to be self-reliant; educate participants on appropriate responses to constructive criticism; and teach participants effective job search skills. According to a post-program participant survey and researcher observations, the LIFE program appeared to change participants' actual behaviors of but was less likely to change their knowledge regarding motivation or commitment to employment. The Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program was designed to ease families' transition from dependence on government assistance to economic independence and self-sufficiency. Its goals were as follows: (1) create awareness of the problems faced by low-income families and mobilize community support/services; (2) coordinate existing public and private resources by integrating them into a personal development program; and (3) mobilize the local business community to provide adequate jobs for program participants. According to a 6-month study, the FSS program yielded mixed results, helping several participants establish some education-related goals and/or access available resources. (MN)

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PROGRAMS TO CREATE ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOR WOMEN IN PUBLIC HOUSING

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Abstract

Our paper is on our evaluation of 2 programs for residents living in public housing in Wheeling, West Virginia. This evaluation was funded by the Wheeling Housing Authority as part of the federally funded HOPE VI grant. Based on our preliminary analyses using both quantitative and qualitative data sources, we have found that women in poverty in the Wheeling area lack education, transportation, and job opportunities to improve their lives and, for some their families' lives. In particular we will discuss the impact of 2 resident programs. One program is to promote economic self-sufficiency in the public housing residents and is mainly a case management, intensive one-on-one program. The other program is an employment skills program designed to enhance and motivate the resident to seek and maintain steady employment.

Introduction

The Wheeling Housing Authority authorized us to evaluate the effectiveness of 3 resident programs funded through the Community and Support Services plan. The 3 programs we were to evaluate were the Family Self-Sufficiency program (FSS program), the Step-Up program, and the Learning Independence From Employment (LIFE program). In this paper we will focus on only the FSS program and the LIFE program. The evaluation tools that we used in our evaluation of the LIFE and FSS programs were case manager reports and notes, WHA evaluation reports, quarterly Community and Support Services reports/updates, and various HUD reports. In addition we used one-on-one interviews with residents participating in the 2 programs. The LIFE program was evaluated using a survey instrument specifically designed to measure the impact of the LIFE program on the residents using a pre and post workshop design. However, only one of the LIFE workshops during the yearlong evaluation contract was evaluated. The FSS program was evaluated using one-on-one interviews and reviewing the files of the residents who were willing to allow us to view their files.

LIFE Program Evaluation

The LIFE program has five objectives. It is designed to improve one's communication skills and attitude as well as to teach one how to set goals and accomplish them. The program helps motivate the participants and encourages them to be self-reliant, works at educating them on the appropriate response to constructive criticism, and teaches effective job search skills. It is an intense three-week program attempting to fulfill all of the above objectives.

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Since the LIFE program promotes and educates individuals about job skills and employment scenarios, the researchers created a two-page survey measuring these aspects of the program. The first page of the survey inquired about the participants' job performance, job skills, and employment commitment. Examples of items from each of these areas are: "I know it is important to go to work every day." for job performance; "I feel confident that I could complete a job application." for the job skills section; and "I feel strongly that I need a job." for the section on employment commitment. Participants responded to the survey using the Likert scale model of responses ranging from disagree very much to agree very much.

The second page of the survey asked about previous job seeking activities. We measured these activities by having a list of job seeking activities, including checking classified ads in newspapers and asking friends/neighbors, with the participant responding if they have used this method in the past. A contingency question asked the respondents to indicate how many times they have used this method in the past. The second page also contained demographic questions as well as the opportunity for the participants to express their thoughts on this subject.

In our evaluation we found that the LIFE program appeared to change actual behaviors of the participants but was not as likely to change the participants' knowledge regarding motivation or commitment to employment. In particular, the LIFE program improved the participants' job seeking skills and their confidence in producing a resume and cover letter. These are skills that were worked on throughout the 3-week program. The lack of change in employment motivation or commitment is not unusual to find in survey research soon after the completion of a "self-enhancing workshop." These attitudinal changes are difficult to produce in such a short period of time (3 weeks). Only 19 participants (out of 30 possible participants) completed both the pre and post program surveys. Therefore, the results of the evaluation must be interpreted with caution.

At the Family Self-Sufficiency Advisory Council meeting in June 2001, the LIFE coordinator indicated that the secret to success for the LIFE participants was the Job Club that had not been utilized for the more recent workshops. In addition, the instructors of the LIFE workshop were stricter in terms of clothing, attitude, and behavior than the more recent workshop instructors. The other characteristic thought to have a positive impact on the October LIFE workshop was the public speaking component, Putting Myself Together.

The two most commonly used job-seeking activities, both prior to and after the LIFE program, were using employment boards and classified sections of the newspaper followed by visiting places of employment. A content analysis of employment ads in the Wheeling Intelligencer was conducted. The Intelligencer's want-ads section was examined every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, beginning on Tuesday, January 2, 2001 and ending on Saturday, March 31, 2001. The ads have been grouped or categorized under the following headings:

General: includes all service work (i.e. hairstylist, food service, laborer, mechanic, etc.)
Range of wages for this type of employment: $5.15-$10.00;
Clerical: includes all office assistant work (i.e. secretary, data entry, legal assistant, medical office assistant, etc.);
Medical: includes all work in the health professions (i.e. registered nurse, certified nursing assistant, physical therapist, etc.);
Professional: includes a variety of professional positions (i.e. teacher, admissions counselor, admissions representative, web page designer, etc.);
Sales: includes all sales opportunities (i.e. car salesperson, sweeper salesperson, Avon salesperson, etc.);
Transportation: refers to all positions available to those persons who have completed truck-driving school or who have obtained a CDL license.

In this analysis of newspaper ads, we found 2772 service-related jobs (designated as general above) from January 2001 to March 2001 that on average pay minimum wage (around $5.25 an hour). From other research conducted in different areas of the United States (Pollin & Luce, 1999), most families are not able to be financially independent when making only $5.25 an hour for 30 to 40 hours a week.

In conclusion, the LIFE program appeared to change actual behaviors of the participants but was not as likely to change the participants' knowledge regarding motivation or commitment to employment. In particular, the LIFE program improved the participants' job seeking skills and their confidence in producing a resume and cover letter. These are skills that were worked on throughout the 3-week program. As a follow-up to the other objective/goal of enlisting local businesses to provide job opportunities, we are not aware of an increase in job opportunities in the community. We suggest that the WHA have available to the residents a job opportunities board that lists job that are available. This could even be as simple as posting the classified section of the Wheeling newspaper.

FSS Program Evaluation

The overall goal of the FSS program is the transition of families from a dependency on government assistance to economic independence and self-sufficiency. In order to achieve this independence there are several steps necessary to achieve this goal. One is to create an awareness of the problems faced by low-income families and to mobilize community support/services. A second step is to coordinate existing public and private resources by integrating them into a personal development program so that the resident can get help more easily. A third step is to mobilize the local business community to provide adequate jobs for the residents in the FSS program.

The FSS case manager assigns FSS participating families into one of five tracks based on identifying the problems associated with finding employment: Step Up program; career track; some post-secondary education; high school degree/GED with no additional training; and no high school degree/GED. Once the FSS participants are placed into one of these tracks, the case manager along with the FSS participant create short-term and long-term goals that address the problems in becoming self-sufficient. These goals may

include seeking out support services in the community, such as childcare, additional education, job skills training, etc.

The objectives of the FSS program evaluation were to identify the number of FSS participants receiving support services in the community and how satisfied they were with these services. We also anticipated identifying if having access to support services helped the FSS participants reach both their short-term and long-term goals related to becoming self-sufficient. We began the FSS evaluation in January 2001 with the complete evaluation involving 43 out of 100 current participants being interviewed or having their file reviewed by September 2001.

First, each FSS participant was approached by his or her case manager to sign a copy of the waiver/release form. On this form, participants indicated whether they wished to participate in a one-on-one semi structured interview and whether they would permit the evaluators to review their FSS file. Once the waiver was completed, the evaluators were mailed or faxed a copy and then later contacted those participants that answered in the affirmative to establish an interview time and date. Also, the participant's file was systematically reviewed at the housing authority using a data collection instrument. On the day of the interview, the participant received an informed consent form and an interview guide was used.

Then, each taped interview was transcribed and subsequently entered into a qualitative software program named WinMax©. All identifiers were removed from the transcription and the interviews were coded in order to gain a complete and in-depth understanding of the participants' impressions of the FSS program. Themes and concepts were extracted from the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In other words, main ideas that permeated across all interviews were noted and summarized. These main ideas were later compared to the goals and objectives set forth by the WHA (see goals below).

The following goals as stated by the WHA were used to guide the quantitative and qualitative analyses:

Goals/Objectives of the FSS Program

1. Assessment of resident/participant by asking about education and goals
2. Create awareness of various community services and support
3. Coordinate community services for resident
4. Utilize local business for employment opportunities
5. Utilize health care, including needed services such as child care, mental health, and educational opportunities
6. Work with local schools (i.e. adult education, GED class)
7. Work with the resident to pursue education beyond high school if that is resident's goal

The quantitative data are based on 36 FSS participant files. We interviewed 2 FSS participants who did not want us to have access to their files. We had access to 29 FSS participants' files only. Seven participants allowed us access to their file and were

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interviewed. The FSS participants that we interviewed and/or reviewed their files are a diverse mix of residents. The majority of interviewees were female (n = 8) and 1 interviewee was male. Among these participants, the average age was 38.7 years and 6 participants worked at least a part-time or full-time job. The hourly wages for those working individuals ranged from $4.24 to $8.13. Consistent with the work of Seavey (1996), the majority of participants were white (n = 6) and single or divorced. Six participants had received a high school diploma or GED equivalent, and 4 indicated that they had some form of childcare or would require childcare in the future.

Of the files that we reviewed, thirty-three of the FSS participants were female and 5 were male. The average age was 34.79 years (sd = 12.41 years, minimum age was 19 and maximum age was 60 years). Twenty-two of the FSS participants are White and 11 are Black/African American. Twenty-six participants indicated being single, 3 indicated being married, 8 were divorced, and 1 indicated being separated. The average number of people in the household is 2.15, sd = 1.33, (based on n = 34, ranging from 1 to 6 people in the household). The average FSS participant is a female in a single parent family with 2 children (average number of children is 2.44, sd = 1.236, ranging from 1 to 5 children based on 9 FSS participants indicating they have children). The average age of the children is 4.5 years, sd = 4.134, ranging in age from .5 to 15 years old.

In terms of the FSS participants' education and goals, we found that job related goals and continuing education (not including high school/GED or literacy classes) were the most common goals for the participants. This coincides with the statistical information in that 27 FSS participants indicated that they had graduated from high school. Eight files contained goals that were related to college education, vocational training/computer classes, or childcare training. However, only 2 FSS participants at this time indicate that they are currently enrolled in college. Eighteen files were related to seeking employment, completing LIFE workshops, or maintaining current employment. Of those who are currently employed (n = 13) the average wage is $6.28 per hour, sd = $1.05 with an average number of hours worked per week of 29.25 hours over 4 days. This information indicates that many of those who are currently working are not eligible for insurance, additional employee benefits, and may be having difficulty having extra money beyond fulfilling the basic needs of food and housing. Twenty-eight FSS participants indicate receiving welfare benefits. The average amount of food stamps is $255.18, sd = $265 (n = 22); the average amount of cash benefits is $486.75, sd = $367 (n = 8). Three FSS participants indicated receiving free meals and 10 reported using the Food Pantry.

From the review of the files, we were able to determine if the FSS participants were aware of the various community agencies and using these agencies. From our review we found that the residents were more likely to have contact with government services, such as the Department of Health and Human Resources and the Wheeling Housing Authority. Other community agencies that were used involved childcare. From the review of the files we did not find the kind of connections and awareness of community agencies that the CSS work plan recommended.

The main themes from the interviews were as follows: in terms of needs and services, childcare, education, employment, health care/mental health care, and transportation were discussed. Of those services and needs listed, issues about education were mentioned more than the others. Furthermore, the respondent was guided into a discussion about his/her goals and whether or not they had achieved financial independence. Overall, few participants recognized or were aware of their goals. Last, the participant was asked to reflect on how the WHA has made program and service referrals and if a follow-up occurred. The following summary captures some of the emerging themes that surfaced during the interview.

In terms of helping families with children, the WHA has been very successful in providing or referring families to childcare services in the community. Two out of 9 interviewees reported that they received childcare services and 2 additional respondents mentioned that they would/might require childcare in the future. However, of those who did not need childcare, they claimed that they did not have children or that their children were old enough and did not require childcare. None of the respondents in the interviews indicated that childcare was a goal, however, a couple of participants commented on how they were trying to start their own day care center (only 4 out of the 41 files indicated that finding suitable daycare was a goal). This obstacle to employment for some women has been removed for the majority of the FSS participants. However, the need for other services and continued employment at livable wages needs to be addressed.

Several respondents (n= 6) reported that they had completed high school or wanted to obtain their GED. Some had been enrolled in college courses or vocational training at one time or another. For the most part, some expressed interest in going to college or furthering their education (i.e. vocational classes, computer classes, business courses, etc). In the majority of interviews, West Virginia Northern Community College was mentioned as one of the places where they could receive more education. This indicates that the respondents have been made aware of the possibilities to pursue a higher education or at least know where they can go to meet their goals. In addition, another respondent indicated that the WHA took active measures to provide information about GED classes, but the respondent was not interested. The WHA has taken a strong approach in providing educational resources to the participants of the FSS program. The continuance of these efforts is encouraged.

There were mixed messages about employment by the participants interviewed. Two of the participants were not working at the time, 1 had worked but quit, and 2 had expressed interest in starting a day care center, 4 were employed either part-time or full time. In one of the interviews, it was clear that the WHA had arranged for the FSS participant to work at a local business. However, the participant quit soon afterward. Conversely, other participants expressed that the WHA did not assist him/her in finding a job, and that they found a job on his or her own. Another individual expressed that employment opportunities were scarce in the Wheeling area. However, the relationship between

welfare recipients and employment may be a more complex issue than what appeared in the interviews.

The jobs that most of the FSS participants indicated being able to do were service-related jobs. These included restaurant work, hairstyling, childcare, nurse's aide, housekeeping, and office work. These types of jobs tend to pay minimum wage as reported earlier in the content analysis of the employment ads section in the LIFE evaluation.

Almost all of the FSS participants visit the Health Rite or used to go to the Health Department. Mental health care was not a heavily discussed topic among the 9 participants (only one respondent mentioned Northwood). An alternative interpretation is that this area is too sensitive or is not a problem for the respondent. Often times, the respondent laughed (indicating that this may have been a sensitive issue) when the question about mental health care services was asked. Further examination of the health/mental health care services provided is needed.

Transportation did not appear to be a primary concern for those individuals who were interviewed. This does not negate the fact that transportation is still an important issue for many of the residents. Those interviewed indicated that they already had some reliable means of transportation. When asked if they could use better transportation, only about half of the respondents indicated that they could use it.

Again, given the limited number of respondents, it is difficult to say with any certainty that the assistance from the WHA and the services provided have helped the FSS participants achieve financial independence. Among those interviewed, results were mixed. Some respondents indicated that they had achieved financial independence, while others claimed that they had not or were "working on it." This may or may not be attributed to the role of the WHA. Other extraneous factors may be at work here. For example, most interviewees seemed reluctant or embarrassed when discussing their financial situations. Many of them wanted to appear independent, capable, and successful without giving the WHA much credit. Others were more likely to applaud the WHA for helping them achieve financial independence. Nonetheless, this is an issue that needs to be examined further. Some respondents may not have a solid grasp or way of indicating whether financial independence has been achieved. In other words, financial independence could be defined differently for each person.

In terms of financial independence based on the information found in the files, almost half of the files reviewed indicate that the residents run out of money often. Eight out of 14 files that contained information on financial needs and services (12 out of 26 files were missing this information) indicated that they have money for necessities but many of the residents do not have money for entertainment and special purchases. Of those residents who do get help with their necessities, 2 receive TANF funds; 3 receive food stamps; and 3 indicated getting help from family and friends.

Based on the type of jobs that the residents feel they are qualified to do, financial independence may not be realistic when you are making only $5.50/hour and have 2

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children for which to provide. The 2 main reasons that the residents seek out community services are for housing and food. These 2 things are the basic needs for everyone but yet the FSS participants report that these 2 needs are the most pressing for them. Since the majority of the FSS participants are female and single headed households, we feel that we need to address some issues that of particular relevance to women in employment. Studies indicate that women cycle in and out of poverty due to problems associated with the nature of available jobs and not due to lack of motivation. Women in low-wage jobs, such as service-related jobs, are less likely to have medical insurance and have sole responsibility for their children and households. From our review of the files, we found a similar situation. The FSS participants are female with 2 children and are single. The jobs that the FSS participants indicate that they can do are service-related jobs. These service-related jobs are less likely to be full-time, have lower incomes and lower fringe benefits. Seavey (1996) suggested that the current trend in lower wage jobs is that these jobs that are not stepping stones to higher-waged employment as found in the past. In addition, women do not get the same amount of return for education in terms of income that men do. For example, in 1992 women with a high school degree earned only 60% of what men earned with the same degree (Seavey, 1996).

In sum, the Wheeling Housing Authority has been able to meet some of the goals as stated above. Several FSS participants had some sort of goal(s) related to education (Goal #1), had been guided by the WHA to pursue a higher education (Goal #6), or were aware of the educational opportunities provided at West Virginia Northern for example (Goal # 7). Also, of the 9 FSS participants interviewed, they were using the Wheeling Health Rite or indicated that they had used it at one time (Goal #5). The three goals that did not present themselves as much in the interviews were about the awareness of various community and support services (Goal #2), coordination of services for the resident (Goal #3) (except for childcare), and utilization of local businesses for employment opportunities (Goal #4). The final overall goal pertaining to the transition from government assistance to independent living shows some promise with those FSS participants who are goal driven and motivated.

Given the few number of participants, caution should be used when interpreting the data. In other words, the 9 FSS participants interviewed may not be representative of the entire FSS participant population (7 of the 9 interviewees has a high school diploma or equivalent). Those that agreed to be interviewed may have been more outgoing and motivated individuals.

Policy Directions/Recommendations

How do case managers assign residents in the FSS program to one of the five different tracks? It is not clear in the case manager notes or in the residents' interviews which track a resident has been placed. Since there is some turnover in case managers, having a more detailed explanation of the track that a resident is put into may facilitate the interaction between the case manager and the resident. By being explicitly placed into one of the five tracks, the resident may be more aware of his/her short-term and long-term goals.

The Step Up program is looking to recruit more women in the training program. However, just a quick glance at the promotional materials at the WHA main office indicate that most women may not see themselves as being capable of these "non-traditional" jobs. The promotional materials show a middle-aged man at a construction site. In order to attract more females, the promotional materials for the Step Up program should use women in their ads. In addition, it is important to provide women in these non-traditional jobs with counseling and/or social support to address any discrimination or harassment that they may encounter on the job site.

Based on the interviews, many individuals stressed the importance of seeking and maintaining employment. However, employment referrals were not mentioned as much as childcare or healthcare referrals. We recommend that efforts be made to increase the contacts with the local business community and explore the use of employment boards.

One theme that was recognized from the interviews was a lack of follow-up efforts. As mentioned, this can be difficult, especially if the client maintains confidentiality rights with the service providers. However, we recommend that future efforts include establishing a system to track those individuals who are referred to other agencies/service providers.

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